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Teaching Africa, presenting, representing and the importance of who is in the classroom

Teaching Africa…who is in the classroom

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Teaching Africa within IR carries a responsibility to engage students with the power relations that dominate Africa's global position and 'western' knowledge of the continent. The key contribution of this paper is to highlight the significance of difference and power relations within the classroom not only when these are manifested in the identities present within the classroom, but also just as importantly when they are not. Disrupting students' assumptions such as, that it is the western actors they align themselves with who will 'solve' Africa, may involve disempowering them in order to establish a different starting point.

Introduction

The classroom is a political and cultural site (Mohanty, 1989-90, p.183). It is, however, not an isolated one, rather it is shaped by the broader political social and cultural context in which it sits. The key contribution of this paper is to highlight the significance of difference and power relations within the classroom not only when these are manifested in the identities present in the classroom, as has been addressed by some pedagogic literature, but just as importantly when they are not. It argues that teachers of African politics need to confront the pre-conditions and power relations that form their classroom context through absence as well as presence as these reshape the engagements students can have with the issues. There are three key elements of this context that I will discuss here: Firstly, representations of Africa from outside the classroom which students will have engaged with prior and will continue to engage with during and after. Secondly, the place of Africa within the discipline more broadly and therefore within the other courses that the students have taken and the literature they have read. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the paper engages with the significance of both the teacher's (in this case me) and the students positionality and how this shapes the possible pedagogic approaches and outcomes of a module on African politics.

Considerations of teaching Africa within IR, from a postcolonial perspective, should not only examine common pedagogic concerns. They should also reflect on the responsibility to engage students with the problematic power relations which dominate Africa's global position and 'western' knowledge of the continent (Brydon, 2004). Grappling with this inevitably raises issue of race and 'our' own implication within the power relations which we are analysing.[i] In other words possible pedagogic strategies cannot be fully separated from the question of who the students are and who the teacher is, in terms of their positionality. In this paper I trace the pitfalls and dilemmas which emerge , due to this significance of the positionality and thus experiential knowledge, of a British, white, privileged teacher, with a cohort of predominantly British, white, privileged students.

Teaching Africa is already framed in particular ways, and these ways are not always helpful. Appiah illustrates this point through the story of the traveller who stops to ask directions and receives the reply 'Well if I were you I wouldn't start from here.' (Appiah, 1992, p.26). Yet I did 'start from here' and (certainly in the context in which I teach) so do my students. This paper is then an attempt to work out what first steps can be taken from this starting point. This starting point is important not only to be 'taken account of' but to actually start from (Brydon 2004, p.80) - even if it is not where I would like to start from, even if it is to only turn them round and go back the way we came until we arrive at a better platform for departure. The paper does not prescribe teaching techniques that resolve or mitigate these issues and although some tentative approaches are discussed in the last section, the paper concludes, with recognition of the inadequacy of these tactics. In line with Brydon's conception of postcolonial

pedagogy, the paper argues for the importance of both teachers and students remaining uncomfortable (Brydon, 2004, p.71).

The context

Whilst teaching discussions often touch on the difficulty of teaching heterogeneous groups it is the homogeneity rather than the heterogeneity of the students on my African Politics course that is the challenge. This is not to deny differing genders, sexualities, motivations, personalities, and backgrounds of those I teach. But nonetheless, it is a group which in broad brush stroke terms is white, British, middle class/upper middle class / upper class nature in nature, (about 40-45% of our students come from a private school education, compared to the national average of 7%). Into this mix there are usually a few 'outliers' including a small number of students from Africa and other non-white students amongst 80 plus students on the course. In the main however I am a white British woman teaching white British (generally) affluent students.[ii] It is the dynamics, challenges and possibilities of productively engaging these students that this paper examines. This is not to say that I am unaware of the particular, sometimes difficult, dynamics for those non-white students on the course. For example students from Africa are in danger of being seen as 'the authentic voice for all Africans' (cf. Mohanty, 1989-90, p.194). Conversely, their contributions can also be seen as 'personal', a conception clearly embedded in a particular conception of Western objectivity, rationality and agency, that non-westerners are seen to lack. The point is that these dynamics may in turn be partially addressed by attention to the issues surround teaching this majority group within my classroom.

Representations of Africa

One key reason that the make-up of the module's cohort is so significant is that it generally shapes the representations of Africa which they have been exposed to, have engaged with or perhaps more pertinently those which they have not. I ask students at the beginning of the module why they have taken it. Frequent answers centre on 'understanding problems/how to improve Africa', or more openly that 'they do not know much about Africa'. Their engagements are unsurprising in as much as they follow familiar discourses about Africa as a place of problems to be resolved or, indeed, a place of mystery that is little understood (Campbell and Power, 2010, p.172; Dougherty 2003). There are two interconnected issues here: Firstly, a lack of knowledge about Africa and secondly, previously learnt understandings of Africa which need to be 'unlearnt' for students to fully engage with the module (Brydon 2008). Dougherty has previously highlighted this heady combination of little knowledge and very particular images of the African continent as, somewhere in need or somewhere populated by 'noble tribesmen'(2003, pp.272-273). It is of course not just teaching

about Africa which suffers from this heady concoction. Tétreault (1996, p.696), for example, has discussed similar problems when teaching courses on the Middle East. These issues arise when teaching about 'post-colonial' contexts in colonial or neocolonial metropols. This is because empire and colonialism shape the framing of these places and people (Harrison, 2012, p.7). Representations of Africa are not solely about Africa as a place, but are also about race and culture. These have emerged from the racialised colonial engagements with Africa whose tropes still haunt contemporary visions of the continent (Campbell and Power, 2010).[iii]

Africa has been portrayed as a place of lack and absence (Ferguson, 2007, p.10) and of disorder and corruption (Harrison, 2006, p.20), in ways which often other it and, in so doing, confirm the order and morality of 'the west'. Much of this analysis has been inspired by Said's detailed description of the production of the Orient through *Orientalism* (Said, 2003). Whilst this productive othering is a broader phenomena, there is a peculiarly British flavour to the engagement of my primarily British students with these representations of Africa. As Harrison outlines, Africa plays a very particular role in the construction of British identity. It is most certainly not 'our'[iv] only other, or the only other we perceive needs assistance, but Africa is placed in a very particular position *vis-à-vis* the UK through the many representations that have the continent as dejected and in need of assistance. It is portrayed in the UK as the epitome of poverty and social ills, and of the benevolence of the UK (Harrison, 2012). Harrison's analysis of how the Make Poverty History campaign which had no geographical focus became progressively Africanised in its representations is particularly revealing here (Harrison, 2010). Moreover, it is a campaign for which many students on the course have (hazy) recollections.

Such campaigns and fundraising publicity form a key set of representations of Africa that to which students have been exposed. As such, it is perhaps not surprising that students often begin the course with the assumption that the key way of engaging with the continent is working out how to assist. Their exposure to Africa will have been through representations which have framed the continent in ways that have, 'infantilised, feminised and homogenised' (Campbell and Power, 2010, p.167). In particular the infantilisation of Africa and the way in which Africa is often produced in relation to the moral, capable actor of Britain produces a sense for students that they, or more specifically western governments and international institutions,[v] are positioned as agents who can act for Africa (Harrison 2012: cf. Blaney 2002). From this perspective, the agency of Africans or even their presence,[vi] is elided and overlooked. These representations of Africa and their intersections with British identity then lead to two intersecting issues in teaching Africa. The first is broadening engagements with the continent. The second is addressing the assumption of western agency and African passivity.

The course is often one of a limited number of contexts in which students are exposed to representations of Africa. The narrative presented within the module thus takes on

more weight for which the teacher has to take responsibility (cf. Mohanty 1989-90). Crucially, students are often not exposed to more varied images of Africa. The more everyday broader cultural background, music, celebrities, literature, TV series, food cultures, are absent unlike *some* other regions of the world. The major portrayals are through news articles and development or humanitarian fundraising, which inevitably tell particular narratives. In contrast, if we imagine a course on American foreign policy (for example), this course may give a very critical narrative of American politics, yet for students, this would not become America. There are a plethora of other representations of America, through TV series, books, advertising, films and so on; it would become one story of the USA, not *the* story of the USA – an important distinction (Adiche, 2009). This distinction, as Adiche (2009) highlights, emerges because of America's cultural and economic power; representations and power are profoundly intermeshed. This simple point vitally places a heavier weight on the representations produced in the teaching of Africa to those produced in some other modules of some other places. Moreover it highlights how it is a priority to counter misperceptions of Africa more generally. This lack of knowledge is not merely an oversight; rather it is a performative element of the power relations between the UK and the African continent. Additionally, it is not only a lack of knowledge of Africa but it is also what Spivak refers to as a 'sanctioned ignorance' and what Brydon refers to as a 'mandated ignorance' of entitlement and privilege that structures many students' previous engagements with Africa (Brydon, 2004, p.72).

Thus more broadly, the challenge is how students' knowledge of the world and their place, and Africa's place, in it has been structured by 'cultural superiority and interpretive privilege' (Blaney, 2002, p.272). Teaching African politics therefore necessitates engagement with the cultures and even the basic geography of the continent.[vii] But as indicated it is not simply a case of giving students more knowledge of Africa - its fifty plus countries, its thousands of languages, its economic successes and its political thinkers. Rather than a process of adding knowledge, it is one of unlearning and ideally having students reassess their knowledge of the world and their place in it. Blaydon identifies a key goal of Postcolonial Pedagogy as engaging students so that they can 'analyse how they themselves are culturally constructed as subjects- in-history' (2004, p.71). The teaching of this course occurs within a much broader set of discourses and knowledges of non-western, non-white, others. Just as Said outlined for the Orient (2003) western knowledge of Africa has been constructed through the discourses which shaped colonialism (Mudimbe, 1988). So the starting point for students' engagement with Africa is 'ultimately interwoven with the history and practice of colonialism and contemporary global inequalities.' (Blaney, 2002, pp.271-2). However, the ways in which these will resonate for students depends in part on how these contemporary inequalities have structured their everyday lives.

I wouldn't start from here…

The starting point is not only one shaped by broader sets of representations. The module is also positioned within a set of institutional and disciplinary practices. International relations (IR) is centrally focused on western concerns, and as such Africa and other regions are rendered marginal within it (Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Bilgin, 2008; Brown, 2006).[viii] Moreover, Africa is seen as particularly of limited relevance to IR even by those trying to engage with non-Western IR (Acharya and Buzan, 2007, p.289). Reflecting this subsidiary role given to Africa within Politics and IR disciplines, teaching about the continent is usually as an extra, an optional course, something niche and specialised. The study of Africa, and other non-western contexts, is thus placed in a hierarchical relation to 'the core' of the discipline. From its conception Area Studies has been placed in a subservient position in which it provides the description and information about non-western areas that can be used by those more central to the discipline in order to theorise the world (Bilgin, 2008, p.12). There is then a perceived dearth of non-western IR theory and Area Studies is seen to be frequently un-theoretical (Acharya and Buzan, 2007, pp.291-2). This perception of the non-theoretical nature of the study of non-western locales, in which theories are tested but not produced (Bilgin, 2008), permeates into students understandings. For example, they are often surprised to find the African Politics course to contain theory! Whilst Area Studies was originally conceived as a testing ground for theories, Africa has widely been seen as a case where IR theory has been found wanting (Brown, 2006). Thus, 'for the IR scholar, the significance of Africa lies solely in its disruptive potential for neat theoretical paradigms' (Nkiwane, 2001, p.280).[ix] Africa is interesting because it does not fit. But this idea of 'not fitting' and the subversion of existing models emerge in many senses out of these being the concepts and images that are utilised as the starting point. The result is in many senses an undermining of our knowledge of Africa because it just tells us what Africa *is not*. It disrupts *other* content, but is not accorded any content of its own (Mbembe, 2000, p.9).

There is also a sociology to the discipline which reinforces wider socio-economic trends of power and wealth (Acharya and Buzan, 2007, p.289). In other words both the focus of the discipline and who is part of its reproduction in teaching and research is structured by global power relations. As Bilgin (2008, p. 12) highlights one of the reasons that international relations is weak at both engaging with non-west is that 'interlocutors are in short supply.' This gap within the discipline is equally felt in the context of teaching as well as research in which staff from non-western contexts are limited in number. This is part of a bigger structural problem of a lack of diversity amongst academic staff in the UK academy. For example, *Absent from the Academy* documents the shockingly low proportion of black professors in the UK academy (Richards, 2013). This narrowness perpetuates parochialism, which is highly troublesome given the complex interrelations between privilege, academic achievement, colonial histories, and race. Indeed, it is likely to perpetuate the hegemonic position that western approaches to IR have attained (Acharya and Buzan, 2007, pp.294-5). Moreover, this lack of non-western, non-white, staff cannot be seen as

unrelated to the curriculum that is taught. Recently, an initiative by the Students Union BME campaign produced online videos of discussions with non-white students at London School of Economics (LSE) and University College London (UCL), released on you tube and asked *'Why is my curriculum white?* (LSE BME Network, 2015; UCL BME Network, 2015). Given the prominence of LSE as a school of IR in the UK and the inclusion of IR students in the video, this activism further highlights the shaping of the discipline's teaching along regional and racial lines which are profoundly enmeshed with colonial histories and presents.

This shaping of the discipline both in terms of its content and its personnel is a vital set of concerns which have to be addressed if we are to properly 'decolonise the classroom' (Brydon, 2004, p.75). This broader set of concerns deserves more space than I am able to give it here. However, in my own way I do want to address the reality that:

> ...decolonizing pedagogical practice requires taking seriously the relation between knowledge and learning, on the one hand, and student and teacher experience, on the other (Mohanty, 1989-90, pp.191-192).

What I explore below is a consideration of how subject positions brought into the classroom and the experiences and subjectivities which emerge out of them, shape the pedagogic possibilities for teaching African politics.

Who are you and whom are you teaching?

> *'How do we proceed if we admit that knowledge, power and selfhood intersect and are inseparable?' (Edkins, 2005, p. 64).*

The issue of who gets to represent and to produce representations is a subject that has exercised postcolonial scholars for some time, notably Gayatri Spivak (1988). Considering representations of Africa, one aspect that emerges from the literature is the question of who produces these representations or who paints these pictures? Part (although not all) of the productive relationship between power and knowledge is the production of those who are considered to have the authority, the knowledge, the experience to speak. It is an issue that emerges most forcefully in teaching. The teaching engagement is one profoundly shaped by power relations between students and lecturers. These relationships are pervaded by ideas of expertise that imply knowledge resides with the lecturer. This continues despite critical pedagogy's attempts to diminish the 'authority' of the teacher by looking to build on students own knowledge (Ellsworth, 1989, p.306). It is, nonetheless, a norm that structures lecturer student engagements in various ways. The establishment of the lecturer as having expertise foregrounds their representations of the topic (in this case African politics) as credible, robust, and correct. So, whilst my teaching does not rest on a model of transfer of knowledge, I remain the producer of representations that are given more weight and

it is I who frames the module's discussions. Who gets to produce representations? Well in this context, 'I do' and I must take responsibility for the impacts this has (Mohanty, 1989-90, p.192). Who I am then is pertinent to the production and reception of key narratives about Africa within the module.

Considering your subject position in ethnographic and interview based research is standard practice (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p.156; Brewer, 2000, p.99). It is a lesson which is also pertinent within the lecture theatre and seminar room (Ellsworth, 1989, pp.307-310). A number of these engagements have been undertaken by non-white academics detailing the impact of their subject position on their teaching and the sadly often negative impact this has on the reception of their teaching (Sampaio, 2006). It has been shown that non-white women are 'hit twice' in this regard (Kohtari, 1997; Sampaio, 2006). This research constitutes valuable contributions not only of pedagogic experience but also critiques of postmodern and postcolonial approaches and a discussion of the value of different perspectives as well as other epistemologies (Hart, 2003, pp.15-16). In considering positionality in teaching, it is not only the positionality of the teacher but of the students which counts as it shapes the strategies and alliances that can be formed. Kohtari (1997, p. 161) talks about teaching students from various 'Third World' countries, whose response to her as a black woman academic were sometimes wary; they expected the expertise they had come to learn to be delivered by those they associated it with: white men. However, she was able to draw on these students' backgrounds and knowledge by discussing their own various experiences, and to align herself with them in a way not necessarily open to her white male colleagues. This construction of critique in the classroom through drawing on students' experiences is an approach associated with *Critical Pedagogy.* This approach centres on the production of a critical consciousness that cannot be separated from the production of subjectivity (Mohanty, 1989-90, p.185). Students are encouraged to bring their own accounts of their lifeworlds into classroom discussion and develop a critique of their own social context (Ellsworth, 1989). Critical Pedagogy's approach is avowedly anti-oppression and centred on the production of other ways of engaging with the world outside current hegemonic oppressive narratives. It thus seems ideal for engaging and countering the issues of a knowledge deficit and problematic representations. However, as Giroux (1992, pp. 21-22) has argued in relation to the work of Paulo Freire, it cannot simply be picked up and utilised without attention to location as well as who the students and the teacher are. This is because critical pedagogy aims to address the oppression of the students with whom the pedagogue is engaging by drawing on the students own experiences (Ellsworth, 1989, p.309). Ellsworth contends there is also a need to engage more fully with the contradictions and concerns raised by the positionality of the teacher (1989, p.312). In my context, however, it is both the positionality of the teacher and the majority of the students that put a grave strain on adopting this approach. Unreflexive adoption of personal experience would run a significant risk of reinforcing rather than undermining oppressive structures (cf. Ellsworth, 1989 and Blaney, 2002).

It is not only about whose views get presented but also whose views get identified with. The dominance of white British students within the cohort means that discussions about relationships between 'western' states/'western' organisations (e.g., the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations often get thrown into this leaky bucket category) and African states fall far too easily in to the terminology of *us* and *them*. The agency often remains firmly with the western institutions (us) and any agency attributed to African leaders or people (them) is regarded as problematic due to the perception of a high probability of abuse. The questions that students most frequently raise are, for example, about what aid donors should do, not how recipient states should manage their donors. With persistence of "we" and "them" creeping into seminar discussions, there is an identification going on with particular actors. This identification appears to make some intuitive sense to the majority of the students who perceive these organisations as being run by people more 'like them'. Moreover the actors who they identify with are those whose actions are seen to count, whose policies are worth debating, because they have the capacity to make Africa better. This allocation of agency also extends to the students themselves who more often discuss the policies and the failings of the World Bank, DFID and the UN as if they are able to do something about them. These identifications then intersect with students own ideas about their place in the world and their ability to be significant actors. As such they intersect with our shared context of entitlement and privilege, as well as their assumption of their power to act. It is perhaps a given that teachers want to empower their students to be (positive) actors in the world. Yet, as Blaney discusses this approach risks,

> ...largely reinforcing the institutional and discursive inequalities of this age, between those of us in the "developed" North who assume our role is to know and act for the rest of the world and those from the global South that we perpetually treat as objects of our study and action (Blaney, 2002, p.269).

This focuses not only an othered Africa but an over empowered self. It is clear to me then that the danger highlighted by Blaney (2002) is a very real one. These patterns of identification therefore fix attention on 'the white man's burden', and discursively replicate it in the classroom, in a way which obscures the damage that that idea in and of itself does. They leave patterns of privilege firmly in place and Africa remains the object of study. No matter my views, my subject position, and what is assumed because of it, the alignment with an *us* is easier, as it is one into which I am implicitly incorporated. Thus, its problematic nature becomes less overt as it appears more natural.

Tentative approaches

These issues are complex and I do not for a moment think that the strategies and tactics that I have employed, or intend to deploy in an attempt to ameliorate some of the

troubling elements, are or will be fully successful. Yet, I think it is useful to share my experience of using these so as to inform the practice of others and to contribute to the dialogue about these concerns of which this special issue is a part. The tactics I discuss below that I have used are: foregrounding representations, bringing in African voices, and decentring Europe. Finally I discuss the issue of engaging directly with whiteness and privilege through an approach I have worked to reject. None of these are unproblematic and I discuss the difficulties as well as how they can be developed further.

Foregrounding Representations: A central approach to tackling my concerns with representations has been to examine them 'head on'. The first seminar of the course discusses in a general way how the continent of Africa is viewed. Seminar discussions of representations of Africa were informed through a set academic reading – the first chapter of James Ferguson's collection of essays *Global Shadows* (Ferguson, 2007)[x] - as well as through asking students to reflect on the representations with which they were familiar. The module returns to representations at several junctures in relation to specific topics such as environmental politics, the representation of Africa as wild (West and Brockington, 2006), and shifting discourses which see Africa as 'rising'. I return to the issue of representations at the end of the module by showing Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk on *The Danger of a Single Story* (2009). This talk, in presenting an African voice, also acts to problematise more directly the issues of representations, in terms of assumptions about Africa, as a place of suffering and disaster. As such, it addresses the homogenisation of Africa in 'western/Europen' geographical imaginations. I found this head on approach possibly the most fruitful of those I have explored as it laid the groundwork that allowed the issue of representations to be raised in relation to any of the topics covered by me or indeed by the students. One exercise I conduct in the last seminar is for the students to pick any one of the topics covered in the module and explore why representations are significant for that topic.

Bringing in more 'African' voices into the teaching seems to offer way to combat my concerns about the lack of a diversity of representations of Africa. One of my key concerns was not just representations produced by Africans but representations which would assist in producing some degree of identification with African actors. As has been discussed above, this process of identification is important to how students relate to and understand the significance of actors and their actions. One of the key formats I used to present these voices was through the use of different kinds of videos clips. These videos, whilst not necessarily purely 'African', at least gave some space for African voices to be heard. The use of Adiche's TED talk can be seen to be part of this practice, which not only presents an African voice but also challenges the issue of representations head on. Similarly, Djimon Hounsou's reading of Kenyan poet Binyavanga Wainaina's *How not to write about Africa* presents an African critique of the ways in which Africa has been portrayed by western writers (Wainaina, 2009).[xi] It is a pretty powerful poem and it is dramatically and thoughtfully read by Djimon Hounsou.[xii] Moreover, the reading of *How Not to write about Africa,* does little to elicit identification

with Africans. If it invites any kind of identification it is with intellectuals criticising representations of Africa. This results not in the humility of approach that I think is probably needed to engage in trying to engage across difference but rather a sense of superiority that 'we' know these portrayals are problematic (Blaney, 2002, pp. 276-7). There is, however, a destabilisation of the homogenizing of Africa that is very valuable. In this context however, whilst the satire of the poem is insightful and delightful because of it, it provides more ideas of what Africa is *not* (Mbembe, 2000, p.9).

Decentring Europe: In teaching the module have also used video clips from a magazine television series put out by Al Jazeera English called *Surprising Europe.* The series examines the experiences of migrants from Africa in Europe and is useful for exoticising Europe and rendering it 'provincial'. *Surprising Europe* brings in alternative images of Africans and of Europe. It is again not un-mediated but the intended audience is clearly an African one and this changes the dynamics as it does not feel the need to 'explain' Africa and in many ways therefore presents a more varied set of images. It is also refreshing to see the European familiar made strange and European customs presented as curiosities. There are for example short pieces on Tomato throwing festivals in Spain and New Year's Day sea swims in Austria. Perhaps because of this, it is the one most difficult to tie neatly into the more conventional academic debates around African politics. I have then generally utilised these videos as supplementary materials, however, I have used a clip from *Surprising Europe* as part of a discussion of migration.[xiii]

One of the key elements of this decentring is problematising the assumptions of European agency and the campaigns that these assumptions give rise to. Some of this is undertaken within the discussion on representations but also takes place alongside with satirical takes on the aid approach. I have used satirical media ostensibly to break up lectures. This has included a couple of short (3 -4 min) films produced by SAIH (Norwiegn Students' and Academics' International Assistance Fund) which send up fundraising averts and volunteer schemes as well as Geldoff's infamous charity single (SAIH, 2015). The use of these kinds of materials runs similar risks to those discussed in relation to *How Not to write about Africa* in that rather than undercutting the students' sense of agency they provide a sense of superiority due to their recruitment into the critique.

Bringing Whiteness In: Brydon (2004, p.71) advocates that as part of a postcolonial pedagogic approach 'students must become able to analyse how they themselves are culturally constructed as subjects-in-history...'. Steve Spencer who writes on teaching race and ethnicity within politics and international studies suggests that discussing whiteness can be productive in order to expose the privileges of whiteness and also to disturb the notion of whiteness equalling normal (Spencer, 2012, p.185). Given this, I have considered addressing whiteness and the legacies of colonialism for the metropole, as this may offer a way of demonstrating the more immediate everyday impacts of some of the discussions for students. This is done in the hope that focusing on some impacts

that hit closer to home will erode the separate detached outsider view of African politics. The danger, however, is that focusing back on the issue of whiteness and the UK's colonial practices starts to displace Africa. Postcolonial contexts need to be discussed for themselves not only in relation to 'the West' or 'the coloniser' (Chakrabarty 2008). Indeed, in the bid to be critical, the daily realities and political standpoints of postcolonial populations can become obscured (Krishna, 1993; Blaney, 2002). Moreover, whilst students awareness of their own position is important it most not become overly personalised as this runs the risk of making the solutions seem to be about personal demeanour, obscuring, rather than analysing, the long historical and political processes that should be highlighted and analysed (Mohanty, 1989-90, pp.193-4).

Starting from here

Encouraging students' awareness of their own positon within the broader power relations is important when teaching any subject which engages centrally with identity (Mohanty, 1989-90, p. 193). The pedagogic literature has to an extent examined the significance of identity in either heterogeneous contexts or those in which the teacher's identity is somewhat at odds with the majority of the cohort (Kohtari, 1997; Sampaio, 2006). This paper advances this literature by exploring the unaddressed but essential issue of power relations in a classroom in which there is a high degree of privilege and homogeneity within the cohort and with teaching staff. As Brydon states "... privilege feeds on forms of sanctioned ignorance that are so close to our sense of who we are that they very hard to address..." (2004, p.81). The structure of this privilege is productive of very specific areas of ignorance and false confidence with regards to Africa. Disempowering students, by disrupting their assumption that the western actors they align themselves with, as the ones who will 'solve' Africa, is a central concern in my teaching, (cf. Blaney, 2002).

This disruption of an assumed western agency emerges out of the material being taught (e.g. discussions of colonialism, structural adjustment etc.) as well through how it is approached. There is some evidence that this disruption occurs. Every time I have taught the course there comes a moment when one or more students ask a variation of 'what is the answer then?' or 'what can we do then?' This is an important moment and one which makes me feel that the students are really starting to learn or perhaps more appropriately unlearn. It evidences the beginning of the realisation that, perhaps, there are not 'answers' that I can teach them. At its pinnacle this is disempowering. Rather than replacing problematic assumptions with more suitably apt approaches, it asks them to realise the profound limitations of the agency of the actors that they align themselves with and indeed their own, as well as the importance of the agency of others. Many start out thinking that I will knock down one set of structures but rebuild another set, that I will provide a set of approaches, if not answers. Students reactions

when I do not do this can be varied; dismissal of me as a bad teacher, irritation that I am just making it more difficult than it needs to be, despondency that nothing can be done, an idea that perhaps it is just really complex, or with further study, the answers will become clearer. As one student commented on a module evaluation in 2014/15:

> Everything was very interesting but I have come away realizing that I hardly know anything about African Politics and the module has only really scratched the surface. Potentially a year-long module is needed…

In many senses then this is perhaps the best I can hope for: the establishment of a slightly different starting point and a realisation of the limits of their knowledge.

The concerns of this paper emerge out of the power relations that structure how representations of Africa are produced both within and outside the academia. Closer to the classroom there is considerable parochialism of International Studies in terms of its staffing and in terms of its theories and models. All of these trends are shaped by globalised and racialised power relations that emerge precisely out of the colonial and postcolonial context in which the course takes place. They are, therefore, elements for which we need to be acutely aware. At the same time, they cannot be 'gotten over or around' – we should be suspicious of any 'quick fix' (Brydon, 2004, p.71). In the end, perhaps the most important thing is for me to remain uncomfortably aware of my (and my students) positionality, the dangers that lie in the single story, and my own position of responsibility and inevitable failure.

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About the Author

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[i] For a discussion of how these issues arise in the South African context please see Sally Matthews' paper in this special issue.

[ii] To an extent it feels unjust to present 80ish individuals per year purely in terms of the categorising markers I have utilised, however, this general perception has shaped my experience of teaching the module.

[iii] Whilst popular representations are often problematic they can also be utilised. Marie Gibert's article in this special issue outlines ways of utilising popular culture within teaching about Africa's international relations.

[iv] I discuss below the problematic nature of 'us' and 'them' in the classroom, but our does feel appropriate as I am British.

[v] This identification of students with 'western' actors is discussed later in the paper.

[vi] Here I am thinking of the representations of Africa as a 'Wild Continent' that is often viewed as pristine and untouched by human interference (West and Brockington, 2006).

[vii] David Harris and Maria Ambrozy's paper in this special issue discusses an interesting way of exposing students to Africa's culture and everyday realities by taking students on a study visit.
[viii] Whilst I discuss mainly the discipline of IR Sally Matthews paper in this volume tackles similar issues within African Studies
[ix] For an expanded discussion of Africa's place in IR see Amy Niang's article within this special issue.
[x] Here I am considering shifting to using the first chapter of Mudimbe's book (1988) as I want to introduce more African academic accounts.
[xi] The piece was originally published as 'How to write about Africa' in Granta (Wainaina 2005)
[xii] The slick, stylish presentation of the reading however speaks to who it was sponsored by (RED)TM . (RED)TM aligns helping to relieve suffering with the purchase of high end consumer goods, this approach has been criticised for obscuring larger structural issues of injustice associated with commerce (Richey and Ponte, 2008). In class I attempted to sidestep this issue by stopping the video before (RED)TM appeared.
[xiii] For info: the lecture did not only focus on migration to Europe - also looked at migration within the continent mainly to South Africa.